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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 GUATEMALA 002705

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [PINR](#) [PREL](#) [EAID](#) [GT](#)

SUBJECT: WITH TWO WEEKS TO GO, VOTER PREFERENCES REMAIN
CONSTANT

Classified By: PolCouns David Lindwall for reason 1.5 (b) and (d).

1. (C) Summary: The polls continue to show GANA candidate Oscar Berger in a clear lead in the run up to the November 9 national elections, followed by Colom and Rios Montt vying for second place. Fears of potential electoral fraud are much diminished, and pre-election violence and electorally motivated public spending do not appear to exceed the levels of previous elections. OAS and EU observer missions are blanketing the country, and the OAS is observing payments to the ex-PACs to ensure that the payments are not used for partisan campaigning. The Ambassador has begun a round of meetings with the four leading presidential candidates and their teams to reinforce our expectation that the elections will be free, fair and violence-free, and to establish a dialogue on bilateral issues with the next government. End summary.

What the polls say

2. (U) A poll taken by VoxLatina between October 5-11, and reprinted in the major dailies on October 20, continues to list GANA candidate Oscar Berger ahead with 37.2% of the vote, followed by UNE candidate Alvaro Colom with 21.3% and FRG candidate Rios Montt with 11.5%. The VoxLatina poll is consistent with other polls in the lead it gives Berger, but most polls put the difference between Colom and Rios Montt at well within the margin of error. The extremely low rating for Rios Montt is inconsistent with other polling information and anecdotal evidence of a larger core support base for the former General. Following are the VoxLatina rankings:

	voter preferences as a percentage of respondents			
	July	August	September	October
Berger - GANA	36.9	44.4	37.8	37.2
Colom - UNE	13.1	17.1	18.2	21.3
Rios Montt - FRG	7.9	3.3	11.4	11.5
Lopez Rodas - PAN	--	4.1	4.6	6.3

Ambassador meets with Berger

3. (C) The Ambassador, DCM and PolCouns met with GANA candidate Oscar Berger, his Vice Presidential runningmate Eduardo Stein and campaign chairman Eduardo Gonzalez on October 21 in the first of a series of breakfasts scheduled with the four leading contenders for the Presidency. Berger downplayed public concerns over his health (he was recently operated on for prostate cancer) and said that his campaign had not missed a beat. Berger does not believe Rios Montt will make it into the second round of the election campaign, and said he discounts the possibility of significant fraud on election day. He also said that it is increasingly unlikely that he will win in the first round. Vice Presidential candidate Stein opined that all the last minute government spending, payments to the former PACs and other manipulation by the FRG would not alter the election results by more than 4 or 5 percent. The GANA leaders expect that there will be some local post-electoral violence in communities where the mayorships are being hotly contested, but do not believe violence will affect the national election. The Ambassador noted that the Embassy wants to brief the two winners of the November 9 election on a wide range of bilateral issues, as the transition period after the second round election will be very brief. The GANA leaders welcomed increased engagement after the first round.

OAS observes PAC payments

4. (C) Following allegations by the PAN that they had filmed FRG candidates handing out government compensation payments to former civil patrol members, the OAS began monitoring the payment of ex-PACs (which are taking place on military bases). The MOD gave the OAS mission a list of sites and dates for the ex-PAC payments, and granted access for the OAS observers to military bases. The OAS observers began monitoring these payments in mid-October and have told us that they have not observed any FRG candidates or electoral propaganda at the payment sites as alleged by the PAN. The OAS also told us that the PAN has not given the OAS a copy of the video purportedly showing FRG candidates handing out the payments to the ex-PAC.

5. (SBU) The Government has confirmed press reports that the number of former civil patrol members who are to receive

compensation has risen from 250,000 to 500,000. Vice President Reyes claimed to the diplomatic corps in a closed-door meeting on October 23 that the number of claimants had risen gradually, but steadily, over the last several months as beneficiaries documented their claims to compensation. The (opposition) press is portraying it as an electoral calculation by the FRG, after ex-PACs around the country have protested against the FRG for failing to deliver on their compensation promises. While payments to the former PACs have increased, the pace of actual payments remains slow, and associations of ex-PACs continue to protest against the government and the FRG. Large numbers of former PACs continue to occupy the city square in Mazatenango, threatening to keep out any FRG campaigners, and ex-PACs have also threatened to disrupt FRG campaigning in parts of Alta Verapaz.

Public spending will have little impact on election

16. (U) Under a contract from USAID, local NGO CIEN has conducted a study of how the Portillo government is spending resources in the months leading up to the elections in ways that could influence voters. The three studies presented so far have concentrated on state spending for the compensation program for the former PAC, the school breakfast program and the distribution of fertilizers. The CIEN studies have found that party affiliation has not been a factor in determining who benefits from the programs, that beneficiaries do not feel obligated to vote for the FRG as a result of receiving the benefits and that the election year spending has not been out of line with the spending of previous governments.

17. (SBU) CIEN Director Maria del Carmen Acena told us that actual spending on public works projects was less than in previous election years, though the budget for public works projects is at record levels. Acena commented that the biggest difference between the election year spending of the Portillo government and its predecessors is that previous governments used budget reserves to cover the spending, while the FRG has indebted the next government to pay for the election year largesse. She also said that while previous governments had built public works that benefited the whole community, the Portillo government has resorted to "more populist" cash payments (in the case of the ex-PACs and the school breakfast program).

18. (SBU) At the meeting (see para 5) with Vice President (and FRG founding member) Reyes Lopez on October 23, the Ambassador asked whether the FRG would accept a TSE-determined result that it did not make it to the second

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round. The Vice President's answer was a categorical "yes," but he then listed a half-dozen reasons why he expects the FRG to "surprise and disappoint a lot of people" on election night. These included the familiar: under-reported strength in the interior, the General himself being a candidate, the strength of mayoral and Congressional candidates and superior organization. Some of the diplomats took the latter part of his reply as a de facto negation of the first part. The Ambassador did not think he went that far.

Plenty of busses

19. (SBU) The concern of many opposition leaders that the FRG had contracted all the buses in the country for election day appears to have passed. News reports (and our inquiries in rural areas) suggest that bus owners are still looking for business on election day, and that Electoral Tribunal members in many of the rural areas we have visited do not believe there will be a transportation shortage on election day.

Ambassador tries out electoral ink

10. (U) Challenging public skepticism that the ink used to mark voters' fingers on election day could be removed to permit voters to vote more than once, the Ambassador and the ambassadors of a number of other countries participated in a public demonstration of the ink by the Supreme Electoral Tribunal on October 22. The ambassadors emerged with their fingers blackened, and the press carried the story, complete with pictures, that the ink is reliable. Much scrubbing and 24 hours later, the ink remains.

Friction between Berger and other opposition candidates

11. (SBU) Competing presidential debates held on the nights of October 21 and 22 exposed the growing tension between GANA candidate Oscar Berger and the candidates for the other ten parties opposed to the FRG. Berger and Rios Montt did not show up at the October 21 debate, sponsored by an organization widely viewed as sympathetic to the ten smaller parties. When the organizers of the October 22 debate only invited the three largest of the ten small parties, the ten agreed that no one would participate if they all were not invited. Berger was the only candidate to show up for the

October 22 debate at the packed out National Theater, once again drawing attention to the growing feud between the parties opposed to the FRG. Berger's disinterest in seeking a more collegial relationship with the other opposition leaders comes across to voters as arrogance, and may limit his ability to get out the vote of supporters of the other opposition parties in the second round.

Comment:

12. (C) With little more than two weeks left before the first round of balloting, there is scant evidence of the highly charged political atmosphere that characterized the first months of the campaign. While polls continue to show that a large number of Guatemalans believe there will be fraud in the elections, all of the contenders agree that the election process itself is virtually tamper-proof. The presence of large numbers of international observers already in the countryside has diminished the likelihood of violence before the voting tables close, though disputed municipal races historically lead to violent confrontations in some towns on election night. Teams of Embassy officers are taking informal soundings on electoral issues in the four corners of the country, and we will provide snapshot reports on regional views of the elections over the next two weeks.
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